CIVIL RIGHTS SITE HONORED WITH MICHIGAN HISTORICAL MARKER

Ossian Sweet House - 2905 Garland - Detroit
July 22, 2004

Ossian Sweet's remarkable story gained national media attention as a result of the marker, including a spot on National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" program. Here, homeowner Ruby Baxter is interviewed by a Detroit reporter.

On July 22, 2004, over three hundred people gathered at the Howe School in Detroit and walked across the street to 2905 Garland Avenue to dedicate a Michigan Historical Marker. The marker honors Dr. Ossian Sweet, the subject of one of the state's—and perhaps one of the nation's—most important Civil Rights court cases.

Were it not for the historical marker, you would never suspect that the unassuming bungalow, with its broad front porch, is significant enough to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places. It looks like many other houses in the city of Detroit or any other community. But the house **is** significant, and Michiganians are fortunate that it remains.

The trial of African American physician Ossian Sweet, his wife, Gladys, and nine friends and family members garnered national attention in 1925. The trial focused on whether a man, regardless of his race, had the right to defend his property, and it highlighted the racial tensions that existed in the city at that time.

The Ossian Sweet House, 2905 Garland Avenue, Detroit

Ossian and Gladys Sweet purchased the house at 2905 Garland Street in May 1925. Gladys considered the house perfect. The corner lot provided a nice yard, and the neighborhood of mostly immigrants was a safe place in which to raise their daughter. During the next two months, white mobs drove African Americans from newly purchased homes in previously all-white neighborhoods. Knowing of these incidents, the Sweets notified the police of their plans to move into their new home on September 8, 1925. During the evening of the eighth, neighborhood residents, led by a group calling itself "the Waterworks Park Improvement Association," gathered in front of the house to show that they objected to blacks moving into the area and to intimidate the new residents.

By nightfall a crowd gathered and later disbanded. The next day the crowd reconvened and grew larger as hundreds of people, many from other parts of the city, met at the Howe School and converged on the corner of Garland and Charlevoix with the intention of driving the Sweets from their home. (Ironically, the school was named for Julia Ward Howe, a noted abolitionist and composer of the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*.) By evening the schoolyard, the streets, and the alleys were filled with people. The Sweets and nine other black friends and family members took refuge in the house fearing for their lives, but determined not to be intimidated.

When rocks broke windows in the home, shots were fired from the house. A white man, Leon Breiner, was killed, and another named Eric Houghberg was injured. The police, who had done little to control the situation outside, immediately hauled the occupants of the house to jail, with the exception of the Sweet's baby daughter. The police charged the eleven people with murder and assault. When the case went to trial, it involved prominent figures in legal history. The NAACP hired eminent attorney Clarence Darrow to argue for the eleven defendants. Arthur Garfield Hays, who had worked with Darrow in the Scopes trial, assisted in the case. Frank Murphy, who would later become a Michigan governor, a U.S. attorney general, and a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, presided.

After several weeks of testimony the jury deliberated and deadlocked, and Murphy declared a mistrial. Afterward the prosecutors intended to try each person individually, starting with Henry Sweet. When Henry Sweet was acquitted in 1926 they decided not proceed further.

The Ossian Sweet House still stands on Garland Avenue looking much as it did when the Sweets moved in. The former Howe School was demolished and replaced with a new building. When you stand on the front porch of the house and look out toward the marker, you can envision the crowd moving down Charlevoix and coming across from the school. Thanks to the Baxter family, which has changed the house very little, we have a tangible reminder of a pivotal event in which a famous attorney asked the jurors to put aside their prejudices and imagine they were black, and in which a judge instructed his jury that "Under the law, a man's house is his castle . . . whether he is white or black."

Ossian Sweet's niece, Jackie Spots, and Daniel Baxter who grew up in the house, stand before the Michigan Historical Marker dedicated on July 22, 2004

Historian Phyllis Vine recently published *One Man's Castle: Clarence Darrow in Defense of the American Dream* (HarperCollins, 2004). Excerpts of the trial testimony and Darrow's Summation are available at the University of Missouri School of Law website: www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/sweet/sweet.html.

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